



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Chromachronology: Seriality and the Professional Palette

Citation for published version:

McLachlan, F 2009, Chromachronology: Seriality and the Professional Palette. in *Seriality and Architecture Symposium*. Seriality and Architecture Symposium .

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Seriality and Architecture Symposium

Publisher Rights Statement:

© F. McLachlan, 2009. McLachlan, F. (2009). Chromachronology: Seriality and the Professional Palette. In Seriality and Architecture Symposium. Seriality and Architecture Symposium.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Chromachronology : Seriality and the professional palette

Fiona McLachlan

Head of the Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture (ESALA)



Fig. 1 Screen image from the video game 'de Blob', Blue Tongue Entertainment Ltd, (2008)

As noted by Rem Koolhaas in 1999, *"The future of colour is bright¹"*, but colour can be dangerous territory. The video game *"de Blob²"* neatly summarises what David Batchelor termed 'Chromophobia'³ with two interesting analogies. Firstly, it mimics a general state of anxiety over colour. In the game, colour is literally sucked out of the town and its inhabitants by Nazi inspired invaders, the heroes being the graffiti artists who re-colour the city. The sound track makes an explicit link between colour and music with each colour represented by a different instrument. The music is interactive and as free form as the gameplay.

Josef Albers noted in his book *The Interaction of Colour* (1963), *"...This book does not follow an academic conception of Theory and Practice. It reverses the order and places practice before theory, which after all is the conclusion of practice⁴"*. Similarly, practice was the starting point for a current research project into the use of colour by contemporary architects. The research was prompted by personal curiosity, firstly, to analyse the use of colour by my own practice over nearly thirty years and secondly, an awareness, through teaching, that colour is rarely discussed in architectural education.

Initially the research centered on establishing a 'chronology of colour', by poring through the practice archive of job files in search of decoration schedules. Aided by digital software, the chronology of colours was then indexed as a series of swatches. Some exact colours, particularly some blues, are already unavailable due to current European health and safety legislation. The colours were listed relationally, project by project, the output being in the form of a triptych painting, which was researched in 2007, and painted in 2008. It represents the colours specified over the period 1980-2008. Behind each subset of colours is a narrative, not necessarily evident from the painting, but known to the architects. In our case, the colours were originally specified using predominately instinct, context and generally without reference to colour theory.

The colours were painted straight from the tin onto plywood - a tradition common in abstract art. Frank Stella, for instance, sought colour - *"as good as it is in the can⁵"*, and both Mark Rothko, and more recently Gary Hume have utilised industrial pigments. It also seemed appropriate to use ready-mixed paint as this was not, in the first instance a painting, but a documentation of colour, or indeed of a series of colours. Paint can be seen purely as pigment applied thinly to a surface, but in our work it is frequently used to define elements of form, supporting the design concept. Zoologists and psychologists have observed that we see and understand objects by their boundaries or edges. Breaking the edge camouflages the form, therefore the paint wraps the edge of the panels to give a sense of solidity to the object. The painting combines colour, surface and form.



Fig. 2. Indexed paint pots numbered in series
Photo: F.McLachlan

Subsequently, the triptych is seen as an index. The composition is deliberately abstract, but it took a number of iterations to find an appropriate arrangement. The abstraction of the colours from their original contexts and in relation to the extent of their use was essential to this. The grid confines and equalizes the colours. By placing them contiguously, however, there is visual interaction, more so than if there had been borders, and this has an effect on the perception of individual colours. Boundaries between opposing colours appear to have harder boundaries than the muted boundaries between hues adjacent in the spectrum. These edges are softer and ambiguous, and, as Johannes Itten observed *"Their stability is disturbed ... color is as dematerialized"*⁶.

In making the painting, a number of questions were raised. It revealed unexpected patterns, such as the frequency of the re-use of specific shades. Seriality in the palette can be seen to be affected by technological developments in pigments, restrictions imposed through health and safety, the typology of the projects as well as personal preferences. Colours are affected by their time, as was clear with the intense primaries used in 1980, but the palette was also extended in discussion with clients. Although the specific hues were instinctive, they often reflect Ewald Hering's 1870 "Opponent colour theory" which is embedded in many contemporary colour systems, such as the Natural Colour System (NCS). Central to Le Corbusier's approach to colour selection was to limit his palette to 43 colours, which he claimed would be harmonious and allow users to *"act with security"*⁷. His *"Claviers de Couleurs"* for the Salubra wall paper company was published in two versions 1931 and then in 1959, and takes account of the growth in artificial pigments, but also reflects his own shifting attitude to colour.

The final triptych composition, *'Investigations in the Professional Palette'* was made after a series of studies. Pure indexing as order proved visually unsatisfactory. The triptych became an object, had context within itself and needed to be composed. The final arrangement acts within self-imposed rules of adjacency, chronologically from left to right, and with projects related vertically, but the final arrangement was adjusted by eye, as advocated by Amédée Ozenfant in his series of articles on colour for the *Architectural Review* in 1937⁸.

"...what architects really require is a logic of the color concepts that influence and organize their work rather than any unified theory of color physics, perception or psychology". William Braham⁹ (2002)

As the above quote from William Braham notes, there is much written on colour theory and on colour science but little on the everyday decisions made by architects, who often admit that choices are uninformed and somewhat arbitrary. Subsequent interviews with a number of key contemporary architects, such as Ben van Berkel and Caroline Bos of UN Studio, Gigon/Guyer, Sauerbruch Hutton, Caruso St John, AHMM and O'Donnell and Tuomey¹⁰, suggest that many architects still work with colour largely by intuition, and indeed attempts to follow a systematic method are often strongly resisted. Yet each conversation reveals a set of principles and a purpose. Within each office there is a sense of a serial colour palette that, sometimes subconsciously, informs, modifies or limits the range of colours used.

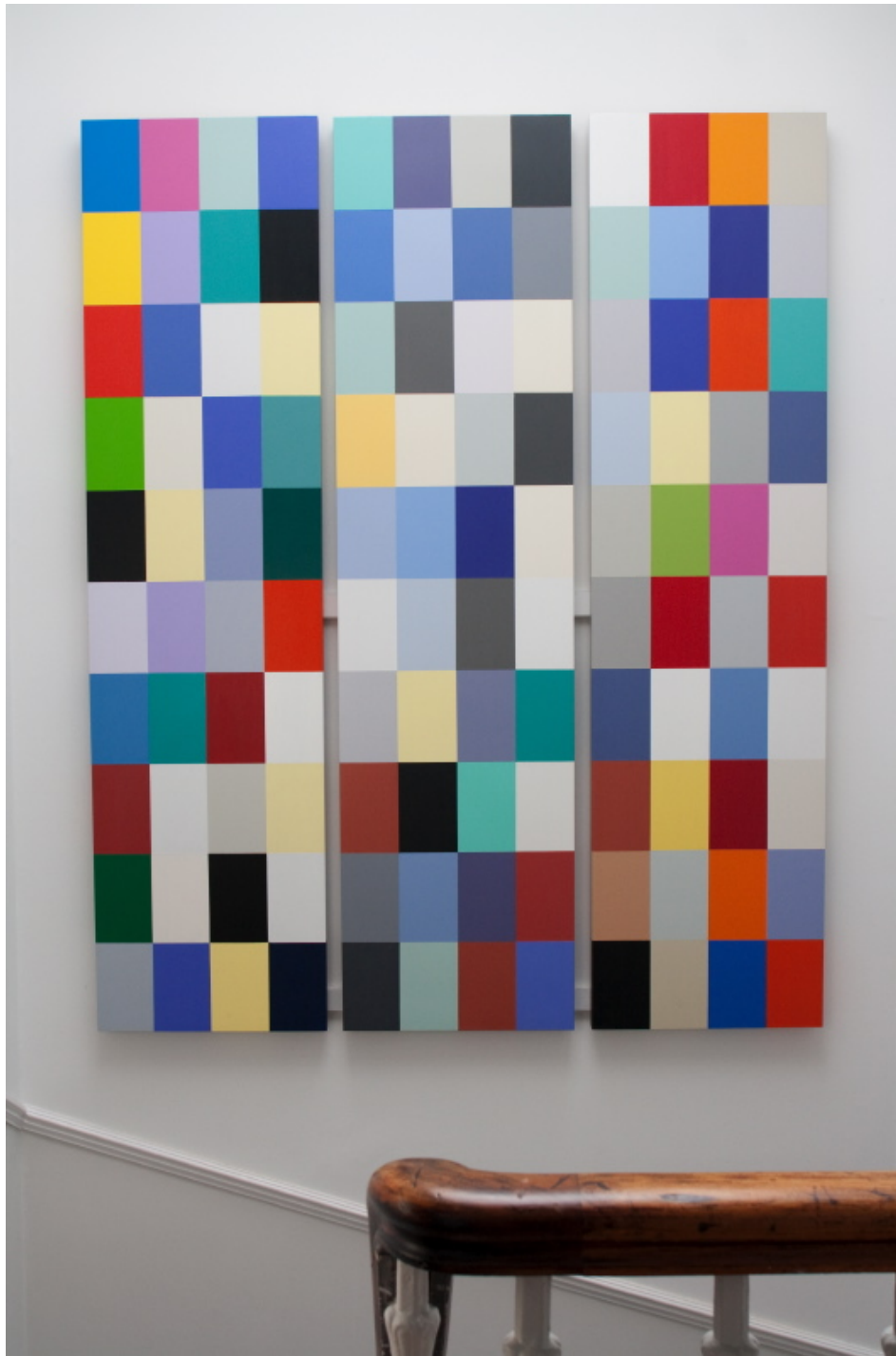


Fig. 3. McLachlan, F. Investigations in the professional palette (2008) Photo: Rachel Travers

Notes

¹ Koolhaas, Rem. *Colours*. Basel :Birkhauser, 2001, p12.

² Blue Tongue for the Nintendo Wii, September 2008

³ Batchelor, D "Chromophobia" Reaktion: London 2000

⁴ Albers, J "Interaction of Colours" Yale University Press : New haven and London , 1963 Introduction p1

⁵ Battcock, G *Minimal Art: A critical anthology*, London:Studio Vista 1968 p157

⁶ Johannes Itten . Faber Birren "Itten: *The elements of colour A treatise on the color system of Johannes Itten based on his book The Art of Color*" (German edition 1961) New York :Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1970 p 54

⁷ Ruegg, A (1997) *Polychromie Architecturale Vol 1: Les Claviers de couleurs de Le Corbusier de 1931 et de 1959* quotes a letter from Le Corbusier 26 Feb 1933.

⁸ Ozenfant advised a method for planning a colour scheme which ends with the advice to 'Correct the design according to sensibility' in *Colour: Experiments. Rules, Facts* , one of a series of six articles *Architectural Review* 81 (April 1937) 196, reproduced as Appendix p111 in Braham, W (see footnote 8) p109-112

⁹ Braham, William W. *Modern Colour, Modern Architecture* : Amédée Ozenfant and the genealogy of color in modern architecture Ashgate: Hants, England, 2002 p6.

¹⁰ Themes drawn from these interviews form part of a forthcoming book by the author, provisionally titled "Architectural colour in the professional palette" to be published by Routledge in 2012.